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THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

MR. GALSWORTHY'S LATEST¹

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

WHEN Gyp was nineteen she went to her first ball, wearing a maize-colored dress and some sprigs of yellow jasmine. Here she danced with a good-looking man twice her age, and this debased miscreant, while sitting with her behind some palms, kissed her bare arm—above the elbow, as the historian of the event records with admirable exactitude. Whereupon Gyp arose without a word, gazed at the miscreant “with eyes dark from pain, shivered, and slipped away,” her face “all closed up.” The incident seemed to her “a sort of revelation of sex mystery,” and from it she suffered horribly—“from bewilderment, from thorns dragged over her skin.” But it was only two years later that Gyp, in defiance of the wishes of her father, whom she loved devotedly, chose to marry a professional fiddler with queer-colored hair and “little goldy side-whiskers,” for whom she cared nothing whatever, yet to whom she gave freely “everything except her heart. . . . She felt no repulsion—this was man’s nature.” “Yet [her biographer assures us] *she was not unhappy*.” Whereupon one can but repeat, in boundless wonderment, Mrs. Alice Duer Miller’s famous interrogation: “Are women people?” For be it known that, from the evening when her arm (above the elbow) was feloniously kissed by the good-looking miscreant of thirty-eight at the hunt-ball, until her wedding-night two years later, Gyp had lived under the conditions of an upbringing which, as the candid historian of her adventures admits, “lacked modernity”—an existence meticulously supervised by her father, who, having begotten her out of wedlock at the cost of her mother’s life, had relapsed, not—like a beloved character of Meredith’s—“upon religion and little dogs,” but upon hunt-

¹*Beyond*, By John Galsworthy. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1917.

ing, racing, card-playing, and stealthy alms and services to lame ducks of his old regiment and other unfortunates: in brief, upon the intellectually and spiritually restful existence of an English gentleman of ante-bellum days. Out of that well-bred world of riding to hounds, of "dainty frocks," of dangled suitors, of music and dancing and amateur theatricals and Aunt Rosamund, who had a town house in Curzon Street and was musical and humanitarian "so far as breeding would allow"—out of such a prophylactic world, issued this sensitive British virgin who, having suffered the torture of thorns from the flirtatious kiss of a personable dancing-partner, could yield herself, unloving and unimpassioned, yet without unhappiness, without repulsion (her biographer himself has said it), to the embraces of a Swedish virtuoso whose customary aspect included a velvet hat, a brownish-gray frock-coat suit, the flowing tie of orthodox Bohemianism, and little goldy side-whiskers. "She was glad to give him pleasure," relates her soberly precise historian.

Why did Gyp take her side-whiskered Swede for bridegroom? Did she herself know? Certainly not. Does her biographer know? His irony, gentle and pervasive, is sometimes subtle. He sounds in Gyp's behalf the redemption motive beloved of Richard Wagner—that strange product of a sublimated sentimentalism that haunted the most sensuous of tonal mystics from *The Flying Dutchman* to the parable of the Pure Fool. A certain baroness, "to whom innocence was piquant," had said of Fjorsen, the Swedish amorist with side-whiskers, "*Des femmes—toujours des femmes! C'est grand dommage.*" He wants saving from himself." And so, since Gyp felt for him "the interest children feel in things mysterious, out of reach, yet within reach if only they dared"; since she felt, too, the tug of those words of the baroness about salvation; since he was in his way a dandy, beautifully washed ("always an important thing"); since she was attracted by "his strangeness, wildness, the mesmeric pull of his passion for her, his music": why, what more natural (and also what more inexplicable) than that she should have yielded her body to him with as little awareness of spiritual outrage as the damned who yield themselves for the price of a night's lodging, or the respected who yield for the price of a home for life?

Having accepted his embraces for the sake of his strangeness and his art and the possible privilege of reclaiming him

from a cruder form of prostitution than her own, this charming sentimentalist who is our heroine seems never to have realized the profundity of her spiritual debasement; nor, alas, does her biographer, the excellent Mr. Galsworthy, whose shining legend of spiritual aristocracy had seemed to be created for permanent admiration and patterning. He seems to invite our abhorrence of Fiorsen, the Swedish bridegroom, who, despite his unabridged carnality, his velvet hat, his side-whiskers (which he shaved after his marriage), and his infidelities, had really been the chief sufferer, decidedly the injured party, in an unhandsome deal: for, having obeyed an honestly passionate impulse, he found himself clasping a wife who, indifferent to love, had deliberately espoused his fiddle, his romantic aura, and a potentially implicit "better self" which she hoped to educe. Of the essential indecency of Gyp's course, its human and spiritual malfeasance, its blend of sentimentality and obtuseness, Mr. Galsworthy reveals no consciousness in his pitying and protective attitude toward the presumably injured member of this union. Gyp, possessed of the wild and sinister notion that souls can be "saved" by other than themselves; assuming that, having given freely to her husband "everything except her heart," she was entitled to regard herself as an outraged spouse when he sought consolation elsewhere, is a figure who should have appeared before us on Mr. Galsworthy's usually enlightened stage in her true character of romantic egoist. Instead, she is presented by her sponsor, with his famous gesture of compassionate tenderness, as an exquisite victim of the sexual atrocity of man.

To any calm, frank, and unsuffused eye, of course, Fiorsen will seem to have been cruelly misused, cruelly betrayed. Indeed, in a distant millennium of intellectual and spiritual candor, it will be perceived that husbands are more often betrayed than wives, lovers more often than mistresses. Fiorsen's cards had been laid on the table before Gyp from the start: he had never pretended to her that he was all fire and air, a high soul consecrated to beauty. He *had* told her that he was a *mauvais sujet*, but that if she loved him he would no longer be one. And she, yielding him "everything except her heart," had no realization of the degree to which she had failed him. Nor has Mr. Galsworthy. It is even set down to her credit that she did not really "hate" him when her coldness, her mere bodily compliance, had driven

him to restless infidelity. "However difficult it may be to live with an artist, to hate him is quite as difficult. An artist is so flexible—only the rigid can be hated." That says something, undeniably; but it is one of the satin superfluities in Mr. Galsworthy's narrative. Gyp, under the circumstances, was not privileged to hate—her part was repentance and reparation, so far as repentance and reparation are effective in such circumstances—which is virtually not at all. One has small affection for Fiorsen—he was a male and a virtuoso: hence he was not always lovable. But even the unlovable may justifiably resent betrayal; and it is our main quarrel with Mr. Galsworthy that he seems to have no perception of the case that might be made out—that must be made out—for Fiorsen. It is even, amusingly enough, imputed to Fiorsen's fault when Gyp can no longer derive her former emotions from his violin playing. "She had heard him now too often, knew too exactly how he produced those sounds; knew that their fire and sweetness and nobility sprang from fingers, ear, brain—not from soul." Having denied him her love, she must now deny him also that pretty fantasy of the sentimental amateur, "inspiration" functioning alone and unaided by deliberation and toil. This is, of course, the feeblest aesthetic romanticism; and it is strange to see Mr. Galsworthy, an artist in understanding and often in craftsmanship, thus beating in the void his luminous wings in vain.

Indeed, the reflection and the feeling, the imagining and contriving, in this passional biography are often conventionalized and unveracious. Gyp, disdaining a divorce from Fiorsen, takes for her lover a young Englishman who, though he resembled the Botticelli or Masaccio "Head of a Young Man" in the National Gallery, nevertheless "looked well in evening clothes"; had dark, curly hair; was absorbed by his club, his horses and dogs, society, the law-courts, grouse-shooting; and loved *Pagliacci*. To him she yields "everything"—including her heart. He is killed while riding; and she, heart-broken, meditates half a year later: "And yet I wouldn't have been without it"; while her father reflects: "Love! Beyond measure—beyond death—it nearly kills. But one wouldn't have been without it. . . ." Platitudes under haloes, Meredith would have called them. Mr. Galsworthy cannot write for long without writing well, and so there are stretches of beauty in this novel, things that delight and fulfill. But the quality of the thinking, the quality

of the utterance, are too often—far too often—mechanical and perfunctory. With disquieting frequency we get machine-made patterns, stale formulas of delineation, instead of fresh, personal, closely studied indications of character. It is distressing to find an anxious and scrupulous craftsman like Mr. Galsworthy speaking soberly of a “white, scared face,” of an expression of “cold contempt,” of a “twisted smile,” of one who “stood as if turned to stone,” of a “sea of faces,” of sensual villains who flip cigarette ashes, of furious persons who “hiss” in their rage words that by no possibility could ever be hissed—it would seem odd to find Mr. Galsworthy included in Mr. Franklin P. Adams’ library of “historical fiction”: but clearly he belongs there when he is capable of telling us that “Fiorsen hissed out: ‘Don’t talk of Gyp!’”

And how is one to account for the curiously naïve intellectual tone that Mr. Galsworthy’s chronicle exhibits at times? What has come over him that he should be moved to tell us solemnly that “a man passionately in love craves solitude”; that “there are women who inspire feeling so direct and simple that reason does not come into play”? Yes, yes: and it’s love that makes the world go round; and there’s no fool like an old fool; and men were deceivers ever.—Mr. Galsworthy used to have a shrewd and vibrant sense of humor. It would not formerly have been easy to impeach him for artless banalities, for economy of thought, for undisguished writing.

LAWRENCE GILMAN.